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TAGS: PGOV GA

SUBJECT: THE GAMBIA: PRESIDENT JAMMEH AS TRADITIONAL HEALER

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOSEPH STAFFORD, REASON 1.4 (B AND D)

THE PRESIDENT'S HOSPITAL VISITS

¶1. (U) In recent days, President Jammeh has assumed the role of traditional healer, following in the footsteps of his father and other family members. Claiming healing powers, he paid well-publicized, televised visits to Banjul's principal hospital, visiting patients in their beds, holding the Quran over them and rubbing a mysterious elixir over their stomachs. The patients, as shown on the local television news program, invariably responded to Jammeh's treatment by sitting up and saying they immediately felt better.

TREATMENT OF HIV/AIDS AND ASTHMA PATIENTS

¶2. (U) Jammeh followed up on his hospital visits by announcing that he would begin treating HIV/AIDS and Asthma patients on a twice-weekly basis. Claiming to have a cure for HIV/AIDS, Jammeh gave assurances that patients with the disease would test negative within three days of undergoing his treatment. According to media reports, on January 18, he received an initial group of nine HIV/AIDS patients and will begin treating asthma patients on January 20. Outlining his conditions for administering treatment, Jammeh stated, inter alia, that patients were to refrain from "Western medication" while in his care.

COMMENT

¶3. (C) President Jammeh's foray into medicine has drawn lavish media attention and become a major topic among the public, judging from reactions of our contacts. Like our contacts, we are at a loss to explain the reasons for his initiative, which underscores his penchant for erratic and sometimes bizarre behavior. Some believe that his move is simply designed to enhance his standing among the public -- and perhaps that of his ruling APRC party in the runup to National Assembly elections January 25. Others, however, goes so far as to express concern that the President may be losing control of his faculties. In any event, our sources scoff at Jammeh's claim of healing powers and express concern that the condition of some genuinely ill patients -- especially those suffering from HIV/AIDS -- could easily worsen under his care. We also note that an independent journal, "Foroyaa," in a January 19 editorial, warned that if Jammeh's self-claimed ability to cure HIV/AIDS was to prove false, The Gambia could be subjected to international "ridicule and outcry." END COMMENT

STAFFORD